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ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

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BY

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THE GREATER PART OF THIS
ESSAY WAS GIVEN AS A LECTURE
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1895

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

WHEN a popular writer dies, the question it has become the fashion with a nervous generation to ask is the question, 'Will he live?' There was no idler question, none more hopelessly impossible and unprofitable to answer. It is one of the many vanities of criticism to promise immortality to the authors that it praises, to patronise a writer with the assurance that our great-grandchildren, whose time and tastes are thus frivolously mortgaged, will read his works with delight. But 'there is no antidote against the opium of time, which temporally considereth all things: our fathers find their graves in our short

memories, and sadly tell us how we may be buried in our survivors.' Let us make sure that our sons will care for Homer before we pledge a more distant generation to a newer cult.

Nevertheless, without handling the prickly question of literary immortality, it is easy to recognise that the literary reputation of Robert Louis Stevenson is made of good stuff. His fame has spread, as lasting fame is wont to do, from the few to the many. Fifteen years ago his essays and fanciful books of travel were treasured by a small and discerning company of admirers; long before he chanced to fell the British public with *Treasure Island* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* he had shown himself a delicate marksman. And although large editions are nothing, standard editions, richly furnished and

complete, are worthy of remark. Stevenson is one of the very few authors in our literary history who have been honoured during their lifetime by the appearance of such an edition ; the best of his public, it would seem, do not only wish to read his works, but to possess them, and all of them, at the cost of many pounds, in library form. It would be easy to mention more voluminous and more popular authors than Stevenson whose publishers could not find five subscribers for an adventure like this. He has made a brave beginning in that race against Time which all must lose.

It is not in the least necessary, after all, to fortify ourselves with the presumed consent of our poor descendants, who may have a world of other business to attend to, in order to establish Stevenson in the position of a great writer. Let us leave

that foolish trick to the politicians, who never claim that they are right—merely that they will win at the next elections. Literary criticism has standards other than the suffrage ; it is possible enough to say something of the literary quality of a work that appeared yesterday. Stevenson himself was singularly free from the vanity of fame ; ‘the best artist,’ he says truly, ‘is not the man who fixes his eye on posterity, but the one who loves the practice of his art.’ He loved, if ever man did, the practice of his art ; and those who find meat and drink in the delight of watching and appreciating the skilful practice of the literary art, will abandon themselves to the enjoyment of his masterstrokes without teasing their unborn and possibly illiterate posterity to answer solemn questions. Will a book

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live? Will a cricket match live? Perhaps not, and yet both be fine achievements.

It is not easy to estimate the loss to letters by his early death. In the dedication of *Prince Otto* he says, 'Well, we will not give in that we are finally beaten. . . . I still mean to get my health again; I still purpose, by hook or crook, this book or the next, to launch a masterpiece.' It would be a churlish or a very dainty critic who should deny that he has launched masterpieces, but whether he ever launched *his* masterpiece is an open question. Of the story that he was writing just before his death he is reported to have said that 'the goodness of it frightened him.' A goodness that frightened him will surely not be visible, like Banquo's ghost, to only one pair of eyes. His greatest was perhaps yet to

come. Had Dryden died at his age, we should have had none of the great satires ; had Scott died at his age, we should have had no Waverley Novels. Dying at the height of his power, and in the full tide of thought and activity, he seems almost to have fulfilled the aspiration and unconscious prophecy of one of the early essays :

‘Does not life go down with a better grace foaming in full body over a precipice, than miserably straggling to an end in sandy deltas ?

‘When the Greeks made their fine saying that those whom the gods love die young, I cannot help believing that they had this sort of death also in their eye. For surely, at whatever age it overtake the man, this is to die young. Death has not been suffered to take so much as an illusion from his heart. In the hot-fit of life, a-tiptoe on the highest point of being, he passes at a bound on to the other side. The noise of the mallet and chisel is scarcely quenched, the trumpets are hardly done blow-

ing, when, trailing with him clouds of glory, this happy starred, full-blooded spirit shoots into the spiritual land.'

But we on this side are the poorer—by how much we can never know. What strengthens the conviction that he might yet have surpassed himself and dwarfed his own best work is, certainly no immaturity, for the flavour of wisdom and old experience hangs about his earliest writings, but a vague sense awakened by that brilliant series of books, so diverse in theme, so slight often in structure and occasion, so gaily executed, that here was a finished literary craftsman, who had served his period of apprenticeship and was playing with his tools. The pleasure of wielding the graving tool, the itch of craftsmanship, was strong upon him, and many of the works he has left are the

overflow of a laughing energy, arabesques carved on the rock in the artist's painless hours.

All art, it is true, is play of a sort ; the 'sport-impulse' (to translate a German phrase) is deep at the root of the artist's power ; Sophocles, Shakespeare, Molière, and Goethe, in a very profound sense, make game of life. But to make game of life was to each of these the very loftiest and most imperative employ to be found for him on this planet ; to hold the mirror up to Nature so that for the first time she may see herself ; to 'be a candle-holder and look on' at the pageantry which, but for the candle-holder, would huddle along in the undistinguishable blackness, filled them with the pride of place. Stevenson had the sport-impulse at the depths of his nature, but he also had, perhaps he

had inherited, an instinct for work in more blockish material, for lighthouse-building and iron-founding. In a 'Letter to a Young Artist,' contributed to a magazine years ago, he compares the artist in paint or in words to the keeper of a booth at the world's fair, dependent for his bread on his success in amusing others. In his volume of poems he almost apologises for his excellence in literature :

'Say not of me, that weakly I declined
The labours of my sires, and fled the sea,
The towers we founded, and the lamps we lit,
To play at home with paper like a child ;
But rather say : *In the afternoon of time*
A strenuous family dusted from its hands
The sand of granite, and beholding far
Along the sounding coasts its pyramids
And tall memorials catch the dying sun,
Smiled well-content, and to this childish task
Around the fire addressed its evening hours.'

Some of his works are, no doubt, best described as paper-games. In *The Wrong*

Box, for instance, there is something very like the card-game commonly called 'Old Maid'; the odd card is a superfluous corpse, and each dismayed recipient in turn assumes a disguise and a pseudonym and bravely passes on that uncomfortable inheritance. It is an admirable farce, hardly touched with grimness, unshaken by the breath of reality, full of fantastic character; the strange funeral procession is attended by shouts of glee at each of its stages, and finally melts into space.

But, when all is said, it is not with work of this kind that Olympus is stormed; art must be brought closer into relation with life, these airy and delightful freaks of fancy must be subdued to a serious scheme if they are to serve as credentials for a seat among the immortals. The

decorative painter, whose pencil runs so freely in limning these half-human processions of outlined fauns and wood-nymphs, is asked at last to paint an easel picture.

Stevenson is best where he shows most restraint, and his peculiarly rich fancy, which ran riot at the suggestion of every passing whim, gave him, what many a modern writer sadly lacks, plenty to restrain, an exuberant field for self-denial. Here was an opportunity for art and labour; the luxuriance of the virgin forests of the West may be clipped and pruned for a lifetime with no fear of reducing them to the trim similitude of a Dutch garden. His bountiful and generous nature could profit by a spell of training that would emaciate a poorer stock. From the first, his delight in earth and the

earth-born was keen and multiform ; his
zest in life

‘ put a spirit of youth in everything,
That heavy Saturn laugh’d and leap’d with him ’ ;

and his fancy, light and quick as a child’s,
made of the world around him an en-
chanted pleasance. The realism, as it is
called, that deals only with the banalities
and squalors of life, and weaves into the
mesh of its story no character but would
make you yawn if you passed ten minutes
with him in a railway carriage, might well
take a lesson from this man, if it had the
brains. Picture to yourself (it is not hard)
an average suburb of London. The long
rows of identical bilious brick houses,
with the inevitable lace curtains, a symbol
merely of the will and power to wash ; the
awful nondescript object, generally under
glass, in the front window—the shrine of

the unknown god of art ; the sombre invariable citizen, whose garb gives no suggestion of his occupation or his tastes—a person, it would seem, only by courtesy ; the piano-organ the music of the day, and the hideous voice of the vendor of half-penny papers the music of the night ; could anything be less promising than such a row of houses for the theatre of romance ? Set a realist to walk down one of these streets : he will inquire about milk-bills and servants' wages, latch-keys and Sunday avocations, and come back with a tale of small meannesses and petty respectabilities written in the approved modern fashion. Yet Stevenson, it seems likely, could not pass along such a line of brick bandboxes without having his pulses set a-throbbing by the imaginative possibilities of the place. Of his

own Lieutenant Brackenbury Rich he says :

‘The succession of faces in the lamplight stirred the lieutenant’s imagination; and it seemed to him as if he could walk for ever in that stimulating city atmosphere and surrounded by the mystery of four million private lives. He glanced at the houses and marvelled what was passing behind those warmly lighted windows; he looked into face after face, and saw them each intent upon some unknown interest, criminal or kindly.’

It was that same evening that Prince Florizel’s friend, under the name of Mr. Morris, was giving a party in one of the houses of West Kensington. In one at least of the houses of that brick wilderness human spirits were being tested as on an anvil, and most of them tossed aside. So also, in *The Rajah’s Diamond*, it was a quiet suburban garden that witnessed the sudden apparition of Mr. Harry Hartley and

his treasures precipitated over the wall ; it was in the same garden that the Rev. Simon Rolles suddenly, to his own surprise, became a thief. A monotony of bad building is no doubt a bad thing, but it cannot paralyse the activities or frustrate the agonies of the mind of man.

To a man with Stevenson's live and searching imagination, every work of human hands became vocal with possible associations. Buildings positively chattered to him ; the little inn at Queensferry, which even for Scott had meant only mutton and currant jelly, with cranberries 'vera weel preserved,' gave him the cardinal incident of *Kidnapped*. How should the world ever seem dull or sordid to one whom a railway-station would take into its confidence, to whom the very flagstones of the pavement told their story, in whose

mind 'the effect of night, of any flowing water, of lighted cities, of the peep of day, of ships, of the open ocean,' called up 'an army of anonymous desires and pleasures?' To have the 'golden-tongued Romance with serene lute' for a mistress and familiar is to be fortified against the assaults of tedium.

His attitude towards the surprising and momentous gifts of life was one prolonged passion of praise and joy. There is none of his books that reads like the meditations of an invalid. He has the readiest sympathy for all exhibitions of impulsive energy; his heart goes out to a sailor, and leaps into ecstasy over a generous adventurer or buccaneer. Of one of his earlier books he says: 'From the negative point of view I flatter myself this volume has a certain stamp. Although it runs to con-

siderably upwards of two hundred pages, it contains not a single reference to the imbecility of God's universe, nor so much as a single hint that I could have made a better one myself.' And this was an omission that he never remedied in his later works. Indeed, his zest in life, whether lived in the back gardens of a town or on the high seas, was so great that it seems probable the writer would have been lost had the man been dowered with better health.

'Whereas my birth and spirit rather took
The way that takes the town,
Thou didst betray me to a ling'ring book,
And wrap me in a gown,'

says George Herbert, who, in his earlier ambitions, would fain have ruffled it with the best at the court of King James. But from Stevenson, although not only

the town, but oceans and continents, beckoned him to deeds, no such wail escaped. His indomitable cheerfulness was never embarked in the cock-boat of his own prosperity. A high and simple courage shines through all his writings. It is supposed to be a normal human feeling for those who are hale to sympathise with others who are in pain. Stevenson reversed the position, and there is no braver spectacle in literature than to see him not asking others to lower their voices in his sick-room, but raising his own voice that he may make them feel at ease and avoid imposing his misfortunes on their notice. ‘Once when I was groaning aloud with physical pain,’ he says in the essay on *Child’s Play*, ‘a young gentleman came into the room and nonchalantly inquired if I had seen his bow and arrow. He

made no account of my groans, which he accepted, as he had to accept so much else, as a piece of the inexplicable conduct of his elders ; and, like a wise young gentleman, he would waste no wonder on the subject.' Was there ever a passage like this ? The sympathy of the writer is wholly with the child, and the child's absolute indifference to his own sufferings. It might have been safely predicted that this man, should he ever attain to pathos, would be free from the facile, maudlin pathos of the hired sentimentalist.

And so also with what Dr. Johnson has called 'metaphysical distresses.' It is striking enough to observe how differently the quiet monasteries of the Carthusian and Trappist brotherhoods affected Matthew Arnold and Robert Louis Stevenson. In his well-known elegiac stanzas Matthew

Arnold likens his own state to that of the monks :

‘Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born,
With nowhere yet to rest my head,
Like these on earth I wait forlorn.
Their faith, my tears, the world deride—
I come to shed them at their side.’

To Stevenson, on the other hand, our Lady of the Snows is a mistaken divinity, and the place a monument of chilly error,—for once in a way he takes it on himself to be a preacher, his temperament gives voice in a creed :

‘And ye, O brethren, what if God,
When from Heaven’s top He spies abroad,
And sees on this tormented stage
The noble war of mankind rage,
What if His vivifying eye,
O monks, should pass your corner by ?
For still the Lord is Lord of might ;
In deeds, in deeds, He takes delight ;
The plough, the spear, the laden barks,
The field, the founded city, marks ;

He marks the smiler of the streets,
The singer upon garden seats ;
He sees the climber in the rocks ;
To Him, the shepherd folds his flocks ;
For those He loves that underprop
With daily virtues Heaven's top,
And bear the falling sky with ease,
Unfrowning Caryatides.
Those He approves that ply the trade,
That rock the child, that wed the maid,
That with weak virtues, weaker hands,
Sow gladness on the peopled lands,
And still with laughter, song, and shout
Spin the great wheel of earth about.

But ye ?—O ye who linger still
Here in your fortress on the hill,
With placid face, with tranquil breath,
The unsought volunteers of death,
Our cheerful General on high
With careless looks may pass you by !'

And the fact of death, which has damped and darkened the writings of so many minor poets, does not cast a pallor on his conviction. Life is of value only because it can be spent, or given ; and the love of God coveted the position, and

assumed mortality. If a man treasure and hug his life, one thing only is certain, that he will be robbed some day, and cut the pitiable and futile figure of one who has been saving candle-ends in a house that is on fire. Better than this to have a foolish spendthrift blaze and the loving cup going round. Stevenson speaks almost with a personal envy of the conduct of the four marines of the *Wager*. There was no room for them in the boat, and they were left on a desert island to a certain death. 'They were soldiers, they said, and knew well enough it was their business to die; and as their comrades pulled away, they stood upon the beach, gave three cheers, and cried, "God bless the king!" Now, one or two of those who were in the boat escaped, against all likelihood, to tell the story. That was

a great thing for us'—even when life is extorted it may be given nobly, with ceremony and courtesy. So strong was Stevenson's admiration for heroic graces like these that in the requiem that appears in his poems he speaks of an ordinary death as of a hearty exploit, and draws his figures from lives of adventure and toil :

'Under the wide and starry sky
Dig the grave and let me lie.
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.
This be the verse you grave for me :
Here he lies where he longed to be,
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.'

This man should surely have been honoured with the pomp and colour and music of a soldier's funeral.

The most remarkable feature of the work he has left is its singular combination of style and romance. It has so

happened, and the accident has gained almost the strength of a tradition, that the most assiduous followers of romance have been careless stylists. They have trusted to the efficacy of their situation and incident, and have too often cared little about the manner of its presentation. By an odd piece of irony style has been left to the cultivation of those who have little or nothing to tell. Sir Walter Scott himself, with all his splendid romantic and tragic gifts, often, in Stevenson's perfectly just phrase, 'fobs us off with languid and inarticulate twaddle.' He wrote carelessly and genially, and then breakfasted, and began the business of the day. But Stevenson, who had romance tingling in every vein of his body, set himself laboriously and patiently to train his other faculty, the faculty of style.

I. STYLE.—Let no one say that ‘reading and writing comes by nature,’ unless he is prepared to be classed with the foolish burgess who said it first. A poet is born, not made,—so is every man,—but he is born raw. Stevenson’s life was a grave devotion to the education of himself in the art of writing.

‘The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne,
Thassay so hard, so sharp the conquering.’

Those who deny the necessity, or decry the utility, of such an education, are generally deficient in a sense of what makes good literature—they are ‘word-deaf,’ as others are colour-blind. All writing is a kind of word-weaving; a skilful writer will make a splendid tissue out of the diverse fibres of words. But to care for words, to select them judiciously and lovingly, is not in the least essential to all writing,

all speaking ; for the sad fact is this, that most of us do our thinking, our writing, and our speaking in phrases, not in words. The work of a feeble writer is always a patchwork of phrases, some of them borrowed from the imperial texture of Shakespeare and Milton, others picked up from the rags in the street. We make our very kettle-holders of pieces of a king's carpet. How many overworn quotations from Shakespeare suddenly leap into meaning and brightness when they are seen in their context ! ‘ The cry is still, “ They come ! ” ’—‘ More honoured in the breach than the observance,’—the sight of these phrases in the splendour of their dramatic context in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* casts shame upon their daily degraded employments. But the man of affairs has neither the time to fashion his speech,

nor the knowledge to choose his words, so he borrows his sentences ready-made, and applies them in rough haste to purposes that they do not exactly fit. Such a man inevitably repeats, like the cuckoo, monotonous catchwords, and lays his eggs of thought in the material that has been woven into consistency by others. It is a matter of natural taste, developed and strengthened by continual practice, to avoid being the unwitting slave of phrases.

The artist in words, on the other hand, although he is a lover of fine phrases, in his word-weaving experiments uses no shoddy, but cultivates his senses of touch and sight until he can combine the raw fibres in novel and bewitching patterns. To this end he must have two things: a fine sense, in the first place, of the sound, value, meaning, and associations of

individual words, and next, a sense of harmony, proportion, and effect in their combination. It is amazing what nobility a mere truism is often found to possess when it is clad with a garment thus woven.

Stevenson had both these sensitive capabilities in a very high degree. His careful choice of epithet and name have even been criticised as lending to some of his narrative-writing an excessive air of deliberation. His daintiness of diction is best seen in his earlier work; thereafter his writing became more vigorous and direct, fitter for its later uses, but never unillumined by felicities that cause a thrill of pleasure to the reader. Of the value of words he had the acutest appreciation. *Virginibus Puerisque*, his first book of essays, is crowded with happy hits and

subtle implications conveyed in a single word. 'We have all heard,' he says in one of these, 'of cities in South America built upon the side of fiery mountains, and how, even in this tremendous neighbourhood, the inhabitants are not a jot more impressed by the solemnity of mortal conditions than if they were delving gardens in the greenest corner of England.' You can feel the ground shake and see the volcano tower above you at that word '*tremendous* neighbourhood.' Something of the same double reference to the original and acquired meanings of a word is to be found in such a phrase as 'sedate electrician,' for one who in a back office wields all the lights of a city; or in that description of one drawing near to death, who is spoken of as groping already with his hands 'on the face of the *impassable*.

The likeness of this last word to a very different word, '*impassive*,' is made to do good literary service in suggesting the sphinx-like image of death. Sometimes, as here, this subtle sense of double meanings almost leads to punning. In *Across the Plains* Stevenson narrates how a bet was transacted at a railway station, and subsequently he supposes '*liquidated* at the bar.' This is perhaps an instance of the excess of a virtue, but it is an excess to be found plentifully in the works of Milton.

His loving regard for words bears good fruit in his later and more stirring works. He has a quick ear and appreciation for live phrases on the lips of tramps, beach-combers, or Americans. In *The Beach of Falesá* the sea-captain who introduces the new trader to the South Pacific island,

where the scene of the story is laid, gives a brief description of the fate of the last dealer in copra. It may serve as a single illustration of volumes of racy, humorous, and imaginative slang :

“Do you catch a bit of white there to the east’ard?” the captain continued. “That’s your house. . . . When old Adams saw it, he took and shook me by the hand. ‘I’ve dropped into a soft thing here,’ says he. ‘So you have,’ says I. . . . Poor Johnny! I never saw him again but the once . . . and the next time we came round there he was dead and buried. I took and put up a bit of a stick to him: ‘John Adams, *obit* eighteen and sixty-eight. Go thou and do likewise.’ I missed that man. I never could see much harm in Johnny.”

“What did he die of?” I inquired.

“Some kind of sickness,” says the captain. “It appears it took him sudden. Seems he got up in the night, and filled up on Pain-Killer and Kennedy’s Discovery. No go—he was booked beyond Kennedy. Then he had tried to open a case of gin. No go again: not strong enough. . . . Poor John!”

There is a world of abrupt, homely talk like this to be found in the speech of Captain Nares and of Jim Pinkerton in *The Wrecker*; and a wealth of Scottish dialect, similar in effect, in *Kidnapped*, *Catriona*, and many other stories. It was a delicate ear and a sense trained by practice that picked up these vivid turns of speech, some of them perhaps heard only once, and a mind given to dwell on words, that remembered them for years, and brought them out when occasion arose.

But the praise of Stevenson's style cannot be exhausted in a description of his use of individual words or his memory of individual phrases. His mastery of syntax, the orderly and emphatic arrangement of words in sentences, a branch of art so seldom mastered, was even greater. And here he could owe no great debt

to his romantic predecessors in prose. Dumas, it is true, is a master of narrative, but he wrote in French, and a style will hardly bear expatriation. Scott's sentences are, many of them, shambling, knock-kneed giants. Stevenson harked further back for his models, and fed his style on the most vigorous of the prose writers of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the golden age of English prose. 'What English those fellows wrote!' says Fitzgerald in one of his letters; 'I cannot read the modern *mechanique* after them.' And he quotes a passage from Harrington's *Oceana* :

'This free-born Nation lives not upon the dole or Bounty of One Man, but distributing her Annual Magistracies and Honours with her own hand, is herself King People.'

It was from writers of Harrington's

time and later that Stevenson learned something of his craft. Bunyan and Defoe should be particularly mentioned, and that later excellent worthy, Captain Charles Johnson, who compiled the ever-memorable *Lives of Pirates and Highwaymen*. Mr. George Meredith is the chief of those very few modern writers whose influence may be detected in his style.

However it was made, and whencesoever the material or suggestion borrowed, he came by a very admirable instrument for the telling of stories. Those touches of archaism that are so frequent with him, the slightly unusual phrasing, or unexpected inversion of the order of words, show a mind alert in its expression, and give the sting of novelty even to the commonplaces of narrative or conversation. A nimble literary tact will

work its will on the phrases of current small-talk, remoulding them nearer to the heart's desire, transforming them to its own stamp. This was what Stevenson did, and the very conversations that pass between his characters have an air of distinction that is all his own. His books are full of brilliant talk—talk real and convincing enough in its purport and setting, but purged of the languors and fatuities of actual commonplace conversation. It is an enjoyment like that to be obtained from a brilliant exhibition of fencing, clean and dexterous, to assist at the talking bouts of David Balfour and Miss Grant, Captain Nares and Mr. Dodd, Alexander Mackellar and the Master of Ballantrae, Prince Otto and Sir John Crabtree, or those wholly admirable pieces of special pleading to be found in *A*

Lodging for the Night and *The Sire de Malétroit's Door*. But people do not talk like this in actual life—'tis true, 'tis pity; and pity 'tis, 'tis true.' They do not; in actual life conversation is generally so smeared and blurred with stupidities, so invaded and dominated by the spirit of dulness, so liable to swoon into meaninglessness, that to turn to Stevenson's books is like an escape into mountain air from the stagnant vapours of a morass. The exact reproduction of conversation as it occurs in life can only be undertaken by one whose natural dulness feels itself incommoded by wit and fancy as by a grit in the eye. Conversation is often no more than a nervous habit of body, like twiddling the thumbs, and to record each particular remark is as much as to describe each particular twiddle. Or in its more

intellectual uses, when speech is employed, for instance, to conceal our thoughts, how often is it a world too wide for the shrunken nudity of the thought it is meant to veil, and thrown over it, formless, flabby, and black—like a tarpaulin! It is pleasant to see thought and feeling dressed for once in the trim, bright raiment Stevenson devises for them.

There is an indescribable air of distinction, which is, and is not, one and the same thing with style, breathing from all his works. Even when he is least inspired, his bearing and gait could never be mistaken for another man's. All that he writes is removed by the width of the spheres from the possibility of commonplace, and he avoids most of the snares and pitfalls of genius with noble and unconscious skill.

If he ever fell into one of these—which

may perhaps be doubted—it was though too implicit a confidence in the powers of style. His open letter to the Rev. Dr. Hyde in vindication of Father Damien is perhaps his only literary mistake. It is a matchless piece of scorn and invective, not inferior in skill to anything he ever wrote. But that it was well done is no proof that it should have been done at all. ‘I remember Uzzah and am afraid,’ said the wise Erasmus, when he was urged to undertake the defence of Holy Church; ‘it is not every one who is permitted to support the Ark of the Covenant.’ And the only disquietude suggested by Stevenson’s letter is a doubt whether he really has a claim to be Father Damien’s defender, whether Father Damien had need of the assistance of a literary freelance. The Saint who was bitten in the hand

by a serpent shook it off into the fire and stood unharmed. As it was in the Mediterranean so it was also in the Pacific, and there is something officious in the intrusion of a spectator, something irrelevant in the plentiful pronouns of the first person singular to be found sprinkled over Stevenson's letter. The curse spoken in Eden, 'Upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life,' surely covered by anticipation the case of the Rev. Dr. Hyde.

II. ROMANCE.—The faculty of romance, the greatest of the gifts showered on Stevenson's cradle by the fairies, will suffer no course of development; the most that can be done with it is to preserve it on from childhood unblemished and undiminished. It is of a piece with

Stevenson's romantic ability that his own childhood never ended ; he could pass back into that airy world without an effort. In his stories his imagination worked on the old lines, but it became conscious of its working. And the highest note of these stories is not drama, nor character, but romance. In one of his essays he defines the highest achievement of romance to be the embodiment ' of character, thought, or emotion in some act or attitude that shall be remarkably striking to the mind's eye.' His essay on Victor Hugo shows how keenly conscious he was that narrative romance can catch and embody emotions and effects that are for ever out of the reach of the drama proper, and of the essay or homily, just as they are out of the reach of sculpture and painting. Now, it is precisely in these effects that the

chief excellence of romance resides ; it was the discovery of a world of these effects, insusceptible of treatment by the drama, neglected entirely by the character-novel, which constituted the Romantic revival of the end of last century. ‘The artistic result of a romance,’ says Stevenson, ‘what is left upon the memory by any powerful and artistic novel, is something so complicated and refined that it is difficult to put a name upon it, and yet something as simple as nature. . . . The fact is, that art is working far ahead of language as well as of science, realising for us, by all manner of suggestions and exaggerations, effects for which as yet we have no direct name, for the reason that these effects do not enter very largely into the necessities of life. Hence alone is that suspicion of vagueness that often hangs about the pur-

pose of a romance ; it is clear enough to us in thought, but we are not used to consider anything clear until we are able to formulate it in words, and analytical language has not been sufficiently shaped to that end.' He goes on to point out that there is an epical value about every great romance, an underlying idea, not presentable always in abstract or critical terms, in the stories of such masters of pure romance as Victor Hugo and Nathaniel Hawthorne.

The progress of romance in the present century has consisted chiefly in the discovery of new exercises of imagination and new subtle effects in story. Fielding, as Stevenson says, did not understand that the nature of a landscape or the spirit of the times could count for anything in a story ; all his actions consist of a few simple personal elements. With

Scott vague influences that qualify a man's personality begin to make a large claim; 'the individual characters begin to occupy a comparatively small proportion of that canvas on which armies manœuvre and great hills pile themselves upon each other's shoulders.' And the achievements of the great masters since Scott—Hugo, Dumas, Hawthorne, to name only those in Stevenson's direct line of ancestry—have added new realms to the domain of romance.

What are the indescribable effects that romance, casting far beyond problems of character and conduct, seeks to realise? What is the nature of the great informing, underlying idea that animates a truly great romance—*The Bride of Lammermoor*, *Monte Cristo*, *Les Misérables*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Master of Ballantrae*? These

questions can only be answered by deforming the impression given by each of these works to present it in the chop-logic language of philosophy. But an approach to an answer may be made by illustration.

In his *American Notebooks* Nathaniel Hawthorne used to jot down subjects for stories as they struck him. His successive entries are like the souls of stories awaiting embodiment, which many of them never received; they bring us very near to the workings of the mind of a great master. Here are some of them :—

‘ A sketch to be given of a modern reformer, a type of the extreme doctrines on the subject of slaves, cold water, and the like. He goes about the streets haranguing most eloquently, and is on the point of making many converts, when his labours are suddenly interrupted by the appearance of the keeper of a madhouse whence he has escaped. Much may be made of this idea.’

‘The scene of a story or sketch to be laid within the light of a street lantern; the time when the lamp is near going out; and the catastrophe to be simultaneous with the last flickering gleam.’

‘A person to be writing a tale and to find it shapes itself against his intentions; that the characters act otherwise than he thought, and a catastrophe comes which he strives in vain to avert. It might shadow forth his own fate—he having made himself one of the personages.’

‘Two persons to be expecting some occurrence and watching for the two principal actors in it, and to find that the occurrence is even then passing, and that they themselves are the two actors.’

‘A satire on ambition and fame from a statue of snow.’

Hawthorne used this idea in one of his sketches.

‘A moral philosopher to buy a slave, or otherwise get possession of a human being, and to use him for the sake of experiment by trying the operation of a certain vice on him.’

M. Bourget, the French romancer, has made use of this idea in his novel called *Le Disciple*. Only it is not a slave, but a young girl whom he pretends to love, that is the subject of the moral philosopher's experiment; and a noisy war has been waged round the book in France. Hawthorne would plainly have seized the romantic essence of the idea and would have avoided the boneyard of 'problem morality.'

'A story the principal personage of which shall seem always on the point of entering on the scene, but shall never appear.'

This is the device that gives fascination to the figures of Richelieu in *Marion Delorme* and of Captain Flint in *Treasure Island*.

'The majesty of death to be exemplified in a beggar, who, after being seen humble and cringing in the streets of a city for many years, at

length by some means or other gets admittance into a rich man's mansion, and there dies—assuming state, and striking awe into the breasts of those who had looked down upon him.'

These are all excellent instances of the sort of idea that gives life to a romance—of acts or attitudes that stamp themselves upon the mind's eye. Some of them appeal chiefly to the mind's eye, others are of value chiefly as symbols. But, for the most part, the romantic kernel of a story is neither pure picture nor pure allegory, it can neither be painted nor moralised. It makes its most irresistible appeal neither to the eye that searches for form and colour, nor to the reason that seeks for abstract truth, but to the blood, to all that dim instinct of danger, mystery, and sympathy in things that is man's oldest inheritance—to the super-

stitutions of the heart. Romance vindicates the supernatural against science and rescues it from the palsied tutelage of morality.

Stevenson's work is a gallery of romantic effects that haunt the memory. Some of these are directly pictorial : the fight in the round-house on board the brig *Covenant* ; the duel between the two brothers of Ballantrae in the island of light thrown up by the candles from that abyss of windless night ; the flight of the Princess Seraphina through the dark mazes of the wood,—all these, although they carry with them subtleties beyond the painter's art, yet have something of picture in them. But others make entrance to the corridors of the mind by blind and secret ways, and there awaken the echoes of primæval fear. The cry of the parrot

—‘Pieces of eight’—the tapping of the stick of the blind pirate Pew as he draws near the inn-parlour, and the similar effects of inexplicable terror wrought by the introduction of the blind catechist in *Kidnapped*, and of the disguise of a blind leper in *The Black Arrow*, are beyond the reach of any but the literary form of romantic art. The last appearance of Pew, in the play of *Admiral Guinea*, written in collaboration with Mr. W. E. Henley, is perhaps the masterpiece of all the scenes of terror. The blind ruffian’s scream of panic fear, when he puts his groping hand into the burning flame of the candle in the room where he believed that he was unseen, and so realises that his every movement is being silently watched, is indeed ‘the horrors come alive.’

The animating principle or idea of

Stevenson's longer stories is never to be found in their plot, which is generally built carelessly and disjointedly enough around the central romantic situation or conception. The main situation in *The Wrecker* is a splendid product of romantic aspiration, but the structure of the story is incoherent and ineffective, so that some of the best passages in the book—the scenes in Paris, for instance—have no business there at all. The story in *Kidnapped* and *Catriona* wanders on in a single thread, like the pageant of a dream, and the reader feels and sympathises with the author's obvious difficulty in leading it back to the scene of the trial and execution of James Stewart. *The Master of Ballantrae* is stamped with a magnificent unity of conception, but the story illuminates that conception by a series of scattered episodes.

That lurid embodiment of fascinating evil, part vampire, part Mephistopheles, whose grand manner and heroic abilities might have made him a great and good man but for 'the malady of not wanting,' is the light and meaning of the whole book. Innocent and benevolent lives are thrown in his way that he may mock or distort or shatter them. Stevenson never came nearer than in this character to the sublime of power.

But an informing principle of unity is more readily to be apprehended in the shorter stories, and it is a unity not so much of plot as of impression and atmosphere. His islands, whether situated in the Pacific or off the coast of Scotland, have each of them a climate of its own, and the character of the place seems to impose itself on the incidents that occur,

dictating subordination or contrast. The events that happen within the limits of one of these magic isles could in every case be cut off from the rest of the story and framed as a separate work of art. The long starvation of David Balfour on the island of Earraid, the sharks of crime and monsters of blasphemy that break the peace of the shining tropical lagoons in *Treasure Island* and *The Ebb Tide*, the captivity on the Bass Rock in *Catriona*, the supernatural terrors that hover and mutter over the island of *The Merry Men*—these imaginations are plainly generated by the scenery against which they are thrown; each is in some sort the genius of the place it inhabits.

In his search for the treasures of romance, Stevenson adventured freely enough into the realm of the supernatural.

When he is handling the superstitions of the Scottish people, he allows his humorous enjoyment of their extravagance to peep out from behind the solemn dialect in which they are dressed. The brief tale of *Thrawn Janet*, and Black Andy's story of Tod Lapraik in *Catriona*, are grotesque imaginations of the school of *Tam o' Shanter* rather than of the school of Shakespeare, who deals in no comedy ghosts. They are turnip-lanterns swayed by a laughing urchin, proud of the fears he can awaken. Even *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and the story of *The Bottle Imp* are manufactured bogeys, that work on the nerves and not on the heart, whatever may be said by those who insist on seeing allegory in what is only dream-fantasy. The supernatural must be rooted deeper than these

in life and experience if it is to reach an imposing stature: the true ghost is the shadow of a man. And Stevenson shows a sense of this in two of his very finest stories, the exquisite idyll of *Will o' the Mill* and the grim history of *Markheim*. Each of these stories is the work of a poet, by no means of a goblin-fancier. The personification of Death is as old as poetry; it is wrought with moving gentleness in that last scene in the arbour of Will's inn. The wafted scent of the heliotropes, which had never been planted in the garden since Marjory's death, the light in the room that had been hers, prelude the arrival at the gate of the stranger's carriage, with the black pine tops standing above it like plumes. And Will o' the Mill makes the acquaintance of his physician and friend, and goes at

last upon his travels. In the other story, Markheim meets with his own double in the house of the dealer in curiosities, whom he has murdered. It is not such a double as Rossetti prayed for to the god of Sleep :

‘ Ah ! might I, by thy good grace,
Groping in the windy stair,
(Darkness and the breath of space
Like loud waters everywhere,)
Meeting mine own image there
Face to face,
Send it from that place to her ! ’

but a clear-eyed critic of the murderer, not unfriendly, who lays bare before him his motives and history. At the close of that wonderful conversation, one of the most brilliant of its author's achievements, Markheim gives himself into the hands of the police. These two stories, when compared with the others, serve to show how Stevenson's imagination quickened and

strengthened when it played full upon life. For his best romantic effects, like all great romance, are illuminative of life, and no mere idle games.

III. MORALITY.—His genius, like the genius of Nathaniel Hawthorne, was doubly rich in the spirit of romance and in a wise and beautiful morality. But the irresponsible caprices of his narrative fancy prevented his tales from being the appropriate vehicles of his morality. He has left no work—unless the two short stories mentioned above be regarded as exceptions—in which romance and morality are welded into a single perfect whole, nothing that can be put beside *The Scarlet Letter* or *The Marble Faun* for deep insight and magic fancy joined in one. Hence his essays, containing as they do

the gist of his reflective wisdom, are ranked by some critics above his stories.

A novel cannot, of course, be moral as an action is moral ; there is no question in art of police regulations or conformity to established codes, but rather of insight both deep and wide. Polygamy and monogamy, suttee, thuggism, and cannibalism, are all acceptable to the romancer, whose business is with the heart of a man in all times and places. He is not bound to display allegiance to particular moral laws of the kind that can be broken ; he is bound to show his consciousness of that wider moral order which can no more be broken by crime than the law of gravitation can be broken by the fall of china—the morality without which life would be impossible ; the relations, namely, of human beings to each other, the feel-

ings, habits, and thoughts that are the web of society. For the appreciation of morality in this wider sense high gifts of imagination are necessary. Shakespeare could never have drawn Macbeth, and thereby made apparent the awfulness of murder, without some sympathy for the murderer—the sympathy of intelligence. These gifts of imagination and sympathy belong to Stevenson in a very high degree ; in all his romances there are gleams from time to time of wise and subtle reflection upon life, from the eternal side of things, which shine the more luminously that they spring from the events and situations with no suspicion of homily. In *The Black Arrow*, Dick Shelton begs from the Duke of Gloucester the life of the old shipmaster Arblaster, whose ship he had taken and accidentally wrecked earlier in

the story. The Duke of Gloucester, who, in his own words, 'loves not mercy nor mercy-mongers,' yields the favour reluctantly. Then Dick turns to Arblaster.

' "Come," said Dick, "a life is a life, old shrew, and it is more than ships or liquor. Say you forgive me, for if your life is worth nothing to you, it hath cost me the beginnings of my fortune. Come, I have paid for it dearly; be not so churlish."

' "An I had my ship," said Arblaster, "I would 'a' been forth and safe on the high seas—I and my man Tom. But ye took my ship, gossip, and I'm a beggar; and for my man Tom, a knave fellow in russet shot him down. 'Murrain,' quoth he, and spake never again. 'Murrain' was the last of his words, and the poor spirit of him passed. 'A will never sail no more, will my Tom."

' Dick was seized with unavailing penitence and pity; he sought to take the skipper's hand, but Arblaster avoided his touch.

' "Nay," said he, "let be. Y' have played the devil with me, and let that content you."

' The words died in Richard's throat. He

saw, through tears, the poor old man, bemused with liquor and sorrow, go shambling away, with bowed head, across the snow, and the unnoticed dog whimpering at his heels; and for the first time began to understand the desperate game that we play in life, and how a thing once done is not to be changed or remedied by any penitence.'

A similar wisdom that goes to the heart of things is found on the lips of the spiritual visitant in *Markheim*.

' "Murder is to me no special category," replied the other. "All sins are murder, even as all life is war. I behold your race, like starving mariners on a raft, plucking crusts out of the hands of famine, and feeding on each other's lives. I follow sins beyond the moment of their acting; I find in all that the last consequence is death; and to my eyes the pretty maid, who thwarts her mother with such taking graces on a question of a ball, drips no less visibly with human gore than such a murderer as yourself." '

The wide outlook on humanity that

expresses itself in passages like these is combined in Stevenson with a vivid interest in, and quick appreciation of, character. The variety of the characters that he has essayed to draw is enormous, and his successes, for the purposes of his stories, are many. Yet with all this, the number of lifelike portraits, true to a hair, that are to be found in his works is very small indeed. In the golden glow of romance, character is always subject to be idealised ; it is the effect of character seen at particular angles and in special lights, natural or artificial, that Stevenson paints ; he does not attempt to analyse the complexity of its elements, but boldly projects into it certain principles, and works from those. It has often been said of Scott that he could not draw a lady who was young and beautiful ; the glamour

of chivalry blinded him, he lowered his eyes and described his emotions and aspirations. Something of the same disability afflicted Stevenson in the presence of a ruffian. He loved heroic vice only less than he loved heroic virtue, and was always ready to idealise his villains, to make of them men who, like the Master of Ballantrae, 'lived for an idea.' Even the low and lesser villainy of Israel Hands, in the great scene where he climbs the mast to murder the hero of *Treasure Island*, breathes out its soul in a creed :

“ For thirty years,” he said, “ I’ve sailed the seas, and seen good and bad, better and worse, provisions running out, knives going, and what not. Well, now I tell you, I never seen good come o’ goodness yet. Him as strikes first is my fancy; dead men don’t bite; them’s my views—Amen, so be it.” ’

John Silver, that memorable pirate,

with a face like a ham and an eye like a fragment of glass stuck into it, leads a career of whole-hearted crime that can only be described as sparkling. His unalloyed maleficence is adorned with a thousand graces of manner. Into the dark and fetid marsh that is an evil heart, where low forms of sentiency are hardly distinguishable from the all pervading mud, Stevenson never peered, unless it were in the study of Huish in *The Ebb Tide*.

Of his women, let women speak. They are traditionally accredited with an intuition of one another's hearts, although why, if woman was created for man, as the Scriptures assure us, the impression that she makes on him should not count for as much as the impression she makes on some other woman, is a question that

cries for solution. Perhaps the answer is that disinterested curiosity, which is one means of approach to the knowledge of character, although only one, is a rare attitude for man to assume towards the other sex. Stevenson's curiosity was late in awaking; the heroine of *The Black Arrow* is dressed in boy's clothes throughout the course of the story, and the novelist thus saved the trouble of describing the demeanour of a girl. Mrs. Henry, in *The Master of Ballantrae*, is a charming veiled figure, drawn in the shadow; Miss Barbara Grant and Catriona in the continuation of *Kidnapped* are real enough to have made many suitors for their respective hands among male readers of the book;—but that is nothing, reply the critics of the other party: a walking doll will find suitors. The question must

stand over until some definite principles of criticism have been discovered to guide us among these perilous passes.

One character must never be passed over in an estimate of Stevenson's work. The hero of his longest work is not David Balfour, in whom the pawky Lowland lad, proud and precise, but 'a very pretty gentleman,' is transfigured at times by traits that he catches, as narrator of the story, from its author himself. But Alan Breck Stewart is a greater creation, and a fine instance of that wider morality that can seize by sympathy the soul of a wild Highland clansman. 'Impetuous, insolent, unquenchable,' a condoner of murder (for 'them that havenae dipped their hands in any little difficulty should be very mindful of the case of them that have'), a confirmed gambler, as quarrel-

some as a turkey-cock, and as vain and sensitive as a child, Alan Breck is one of the most lovable characters in all literature ; and his penetration—a great part of which he learned, to take his own account of it, by driving cattle ‘through a throng lowland country with the black soldiers at his tail’—blossoms into the most delightful reflections upon men and things.

The highest ambitions of a novelist are not easily attainable. To combine incident, character, and romance in a uniform whole, to alternate telling dramatic situation with effects of poetry and suggestion, to breathe into the entire conception a profound wisdom, construct it with absolute unity, and express it in perfect style,—this thing has never yet been done. A great part of Stevenson’s

subtle wisdom of life finds its readiest outlet in his essays. In these, whatever their occasion, he shows himself the clearest-eyed critic of human life, never the dupe of the phrases and pretences, the theories and conventions, that distort the vision of most writers and thinkers. He has an unerring instinct for realities, and brushes aside all else with rapid grace. In his lately published *Amateur Emigrant* he describes one of his fellow-passengers to America :

‘ In truth it was not whisky that had ruined him ; he was ruined long before for all good human purposes but conversation. His eyes were sealed by a cheap school-book materialism. He could see nothing in the world but money and steam engines. He did not know what you meant by the word happiness. He had forgotten the simple emotions of childhood, and perhaps never encountered the delights of youth. He believed in production, that useful

figment of economy, as if it had been real, like laughter; and production, without prejudice to liquor, was his god and guide.'

This sense of the realities of the world, —laughter, happiness, the simple emotions of childhood, and others,—makes Stevenson an admirable critic of those social pretences that ape the native qualities of the heart. The criticism on organised philanthropy contained in the essay on *Beggars* is not exhaustive, it is expressed paradoxically, but is it untrue?

'We should wipe two words from our vocabulary: gratitude and charity. In real life, help is given out of friendship, or it is not valued; it is received from the hand of friendship, or it is resented. We are all too proud to take a naked gift; we must seem to pay it, if in nothing else, then with the delights of our society. Here, then, is the pitiful fix of the rich man; here is that needle's eye in which he stuck already in the days of Christ, and still sticks

to-day, firmer, if possible, than ever; that he has the money, and lacks the love which should make his money acceptable. Here and now, just as of old in Palestine, he has the rich to dinner, it is with the rich that he takes his pleasure: and when his turn comes to be charitable, he looks in vain for a recipient. His friends are not poor, they do not want; the poor are not his friends, they will not take. To whom is he to give? Where to find—note this phrase—the Deserving Poor? Charity is (what they call) centralised; offices are hired; societies founded, with secretaries paid or unpaid: the hunt of the Deserving Poor goes merrily forward. I think it will take a more than merely human secretary to disinter that character. What! a class that is to be in want from no fault of its own, and yet greedily eager to receive from strangers; and to be quite respectable, and at the same time quite devoid of self-respect; and play the most delicate part of friendship, and yet never be seen; and wear the form of man, and yet fly in the face of all the laws of human nature:—and all this, in the hope of getting a belly-god burgess through a needle's eye! Oh, let him stick, by all means;

and let his polity tumble in the dust ; and let his epitaph and all his literature (of which my own works begin to form no inconsiderable part) be abolished even from the history of man ! For a fool of this monstrosity of dulness there can be no salvation ; and the fool who looked for the elixir of life was an angel of reason to the fool who looks for the Deserving Poor.'

An equal sense of the realities of life and death gives the force of a natural law to the pathos of *Old Mortality*, that essay in which Stevenson pays passionate tribute to the memory of his early friend, who 'had gone to ruin with a kingly *abandon*, like one who condescended ; but once ruined, with the lights all out, he fought as for a kingdom.' The whole description, down to the marvellous quotation from Bunyan that closes it, is one of the sovereign passages of modern literature ; the pathos of it is pure and elemental, like the rush

of a cleansing wind, or the onset of the legions commanded by

‘The mighty Mahmud, Allah-breathing Lord,
That all the misbelieving and black Horde
Of Fears and Sorrows that infest the Soul
Scatters before him with his whirlwind Sword.’

Lastly, to bring to an end this imperfect review of the works of a writer who has left none greater behind him, Stevenson excels at what is perhaps the most delicate of literary tasks and the utmost test, where it is successfully encountered, of nobility,—the practice, namely, of self-revelation and self-delineation. To talk much about oneself with detail, composure, and ease, with no shadow of hypocrisy and no whiff or taint of indecent familiarity, no puling and no posing,—the shores of the sea of literature are strewn with the wrecks and forlorn properties of

those who have adventured on this dangerous attempt. But a criticism of Stevenson is happy in this, that from the writer it can pass with perfect trust and perfect fluency to the man. He shares with Goldsmith and Montaigne, his own favourite, the happy privilege of making lovers among his readers. 'To be the most beloved of English writers—what a title that is for a man !' says Thackeray of Goldsmith. In such matters, a dispute for pre-eminence in the captivation of hearts would be unseemly ; it is enough to say that Stevenson too has his lovers among those who have accompanied him on his *Inland Voyage*, or through the fastnesses of the Cevennes in the wake of Modestine. He is loved by those that never saw his face ; and one who has scaled that dizzy height of ambition may well be content,

without the impertinent assurance that, when the Japanese have taken London and revised the contents of the British Museum, the yellow scribes whom they shall set to produce a new edition of the *Biographie Universelle* will include in their entries the following item:—

‘*Stevenson, R. L. A prolific writer of stories among the aborigines. Flourished before the Coming of the Japanese. His works are lost.*’

THE END



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